

FOR the first time in the history of the Valod branch of Lijjat Papad* Mahila Griha Udyog, the "owner" struck work and came out on the street to demand justice from the manager. Lijjat is a public trust. Its constitution says: "Every woman who starts rolling *papads* becomes a coowner." The semiliterate and illiterate *papad* rollers were in an agitated mood. They had prepared a 70 point charter of demands. When negotiations were ruled out by the management, they refused to work, thus leading to the first ever strike on June 4, 1983.

The strike is women's quest for 'Cooperative functioning. Lijjat Papad began in 1959 as a part time business to employ women in their own homes. It has now grown into an empire, having 26 centres in India and some business abroad. In 1966, KOIC recognised Lijjat and it was registered as a public trust started by seven women. Lijjat now has over 7,000 women members.

During 1982-83 the total turnover of Lijjat was Rs 10 crores, the net profit being six percent. This means that Lijjat makes a profit of Rs 60 lakhs. Since Lijjat is a public trust managed by women, it is given tax exemptions in octroi, sales tax and export duty. If the concept of management by the women is a farce, are not the women and the government being cheated ?

Valod, in Surat district, was the first centre of Lijjat outside Bombay. Activity here started in 1968. The 1971 census shows that the population of Valod is about 7,305 comprising 1,283 families. A substantial proportion of the people are tribals. At Valod, the opportunities for employment outside agriculture were limited, so the establishment of the Lijjat centre was very welcome.

Working Conditions

Women engaged in the preparation of dough come to the Valod centre at 5.30 each morning and start their work. By 7.30 the dough is ready for distribution to the members who come to collect it between 7.30 and 9.30. These

women roll *papads* at their homes assisted by their family members. The rolled *papads* are brought back to the centre between 2.30 and 5.30. p.m.

A majority of the women who prepare dough are tribals. The *papad* packers belong to the so called upper castes. Another set of women do the hard work of peeling off garlic skins and pounding chillis. These women are not given the work of rolling *papads*. Despair is writ large on their faces. "Our hands burn and our eyesight is affected", said Gajrabehn. Sitting in her poorly lighted room, she peels off the skin of eight kilos of garlic a day. One of the women's demands is that all work should be shared by all members in rotation.

The women earn on an average Rs 10 a day. They work from 12 to 16 hours a day. They lose more than a tenth of their income because the management rejects

a sizeable number of *papads* as defective. There is a complicated system for the rejection of *papads*. The management applies a double check on the number as well as on the weight of the *papads*. One kilo of dough makes between 29 to 32 *papads* weighing about 800 grams. If the number of *papads* is less than 29, Rs 1.20 per *papad* is deducted. If the *papads* weigh less than 800 grams, Rs 1.20 per 100 grams is deducted. When asked why the weight and number of *papads* is often less than the required standard, the women said: "It depends on the quality of the *dal* and the amount of water in the dough." Every *papad* rejected on some other ground as below quality costs the woman roller 80 paise.

The oil which is required to roll the *papads* is not supplied by the centre. Surprisingly, the management does not display any anxiety about the quality of oil used by the women. The cost of oil

Papad Rollers Of Lijjat

-A Mockery In The Name Of A Cooperative



Lijjat Papad workers attending a meeting

*A savoury made from lentil flour.

works out to 25 paise per kilo of *papads*. This is a further drain on the women's income. In the rainy season, the women have also to buy coal to dry the *papads*. This costs 50 paise per kilo of *papads*.

Apart from all this, 30 paise per kilo is deducted from their income to be kept aside as savings which can be used by the woman concerned when she is in need. However, the amount thus collected is reinvested instead of being deposited in the bank in the woman's name. This means that the woman loses interest on her hard earned money while the management daily gets interest free loans from the women.

On the one hand, there is a meticulous check on all that the women do. Every opportunity to deduct their remuneration is grabbed, under some guise or other. On the other hand, the manager, it was alleged, had been spending lavishly on irrelevant things, without consulting the managing committee. Women suspect corruption. "I was regularly made to sign on blank cheques", says the treasurer. The salaries of the men employed to do the administrative work are determined by the manager Kikoobhai who claims to be "a humble employee" of the trust.

The women are also sore about the fact that all the administrative posts are filled by men, who are given handsome salaries. "We too can do that work. Give us a chance", challenges Naseem Bano.

Aims Of The Strike

The strike was aimed a rise in remuneration, checking corruption and removing male domination in a centre where women are supposed to be "owners."

The women wanted a rise from Rs 2 to Rs 3 per kilo. "For the last four years our remuneration had not been increased, despite the rising prices", says Naseem Bano, "though the turn over has been increasing. It increased from Rs32.15 lakhs in 1977-78 to more than one crore in 1982-83." Other important demands were: decide the relation between the central unit and the Valod unit; decide whether units are autonomous or are fiefdoms of the

central unit; form the constitution of the Valod branch; abolish the commissioned agent system; hand over the management of the centre to the women's committee; arrange scholarships for the children of the *papad* rollers; reduce the huge outlay on advertisements; stop treating women as labourers; do not buy any new vehicle or other form of property without consulting the women's committee.

Each unit of Lijjat is supposed to be managed by a managing committee elected by women workers. But that does not happen. According to Habiba Bano, who is the treasurer of the elected committee: "All decisions are taken by the coordinator appointed by the Bombay based trust." She pointed out that the women had to resort to strike because the coordinator refused to convene a general body meeting to discuss their problems. Resorting to the strike was a new experience for the women, and the leadership was local and spontaneous.

Outcome Of The Strike

The Bombay based trust sent representatives to Valod. Instead of calling a meeting of the women's committee, these representatives dismissed the entire committee. The strike was withdrawn after the representatives assured the women that their demands for higher wages and

for an enquiry into alleged mis-management and bungling by the coordinator would be looked into within two months.

More than four months have passed since then. The only change is that the wage rate has been increased from Rs 2 to Rs 2.30 per kilo. The women are dissatisfied with this. "These 30 paise are the crumbs thrown to the women so as to shut their mouths", says Habiba Bano and adds: "We will continue to fight against male domination, hypocrisy and corruption."

However, caste and class stratifications do exist at Lijjat. The upper caste women dominate the tribal women who do the harder work. This is bound to happen unless the struggle tending towards equality is strengthened.

Many questions arise. Will the women succeed in acquiring justice? Are all the centres of Lijjat managed like this? Will Valod take the lead once again in fighting injustice? Valod is on the historical map of India. It is situated 20 kilometres away from Bardoli where peasants, organised by Sardar Patel, revolted against the unjust revenue system imposed by the British, and only three kilometres away from Vedchi where Jugatram Dave has done pioneering work of spreading education and awareness amongst tribals for nearly three decades.

Inspiring Proof Of Paternal Affection

Mr Kuldeep Veer Lal is the father of an eight year old girl Anu. He is separated from his wife Sudesh Kumari, and Anu stays with her mother. Kuldeep Lal pays a maintenance allowance of Rs 75 a month for Anu to her mother. Recently, this fond father produced a death certificate in the court of the metropolitan magistrate, claiming that Anu was dead and her body consigned to the river waters, therefore he should not have to pay maintenance for her. The mother, however, produced the girl in court, and she was asked to identify her father, which she correctly did.

Thereupon, the court accepted the mother's petition that her allowance should be increased from Rs 75 to Rs 150 a month. It was found that Romesh Chander, a maternal uncle of Anu, had gone to the municipal corporation's office of registration of births and deaths, with a declaration that Anu was dead. His statement was recorded and registered. It was a copy of this statement which had been produced by the father as proof of his daughter's death.

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